

Joint Strike Fighter, the right choice for the future

Norwegian Air Force

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## **Introduction**

The Norwegian government's decision to purchase the Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) promises to be the largest governmental contract in Norwegian history. According to official figures released to the press, the forty-eight JSFs will come at a cost of approximately eighteen billion Norwegian kroner (NOK), and a lifecycle cost of hundred and thirty billion NOK over thirty years. This controversial decision has incited zealous infighting among the Norwegian people. Many Norwegians believe that such a large contract should be awarded to a European producer, being either the Eurofighter or the Swedish JAS 39 Grippen. However, the Norwegian government's decision to purchase the F-35 was the correct one. The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is the best aircraft for the future of the Norwegian Air Force because it not only offers superior airframe performance, stealth capability and interoperability but also a predictable security politics in the future.

## **Background**

The two candidates left for consideration at the last stage of the process were the Swedish JAS 39 Grippen and the American project F35 Lighting II, the Joint Strike Fighter. The third candidate, the European Eurofighter, pulled out of the competition last year claiming Norwegian authorities was favoring the JSF. The producer felt they were being treated

unfairly compared to its American competitor Lockheed Martin, and alleged that the competition process was running just to meet formal requirements.<sup>1</sup>

Even when the government presented the F35 Joint Strike Fighter as the superior option, the debate continued. The public discussion has been a major issue within Norwegian politics, with both politicians and civilians engaged in the debate. The debate has ranged far beyond the actual choice between fighter aircrafts, and has implications for the political landscape of the country. Leading politicians on the left side in Norwegian politics have even claimed that it could be the end of the sitting government. Especially the Socialist Left Party (SV) has strongly opted for the Swedish alternative. With their traditional opposition against a close Norwegian relation to the US and the Norwegian support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)<sup>2</sup>, a pro American choice would present a humiliating public defeat. Leading party politicians claim it would be too painful for the governmental cooperation between SV and the Labor Party (AP), forcing SV to pull out of the government cooperation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kaia Storvik, "Fredet av krigen", Dagsavisen.no December 22, 2007 <http://www.dagsavisen.no/meninger/article328177.ece>

<sup>2</sup> N.D "SV mener, Internasjonalt", SV.no <http://www.sv.no/Forside/Vi-mener/Tema/Internasjonalt>

<sup>3</sup> N.D. "SV diskuterer sin reaksjon om jagerfly", VG.no 2 November 11, 2008 <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/norsk-politikk/artikkel.php?artid=534154>

## **Limitations**

In this paper the focus will be upon the security cooperation aspects of the purchase. Though other important issues have been taken into consideration, such as cost and airframe capabilities, these issues fell dead as the final report stated the JSF as military superior and less expensive than the Swedish alternative. The most important aspect is the effect on Norwegian security politics. For a small country the relationship to allies is important, and the Air Force renewal might influence that relationship.

## **Norwegian Air Force; Tasks and Limitations**

The Air Force is in many ways the cornerstone of the Norwegian Armed Forces. It is an important part of the Norwegian anti-invasion concept as a force multiplier to both naval and army forces. During the selection process, JSF and JAS Grippen were tested against four different scenarios.<sup>4</sup> They ranged from a full-scale national anti-invasion scenario to intelligence and reconnaissance support of ground troops in a peacekeeping scenario on foreign soil. According to the test reports, the JSF was the only option to cope with all four

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<sup>4</sup> Odin.no "The Joint Strike Fighter recommended to replace the F-16", November 11, 2008

<http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/fd/Press-centre/Press-releases/2008/the-joint-strike-fighter-recommended-to-.html?id=536985>

scenarios, and the stealth capabilities were considered as the key success factor in modern air-to-air combat.<sup>5</sup>

Parties on both sides of the debate agree that the aircraft replacing the F-16 must be able to cope with all aspects of Norwegian national security. Currently, the size of the armed forces only allows conduct of limited scale territorial security operations. This keeps Norway more dependent than ever on third nation support as the nation is not able to provide sufficient defense forces to cover the national territories. The number of aircraft to be purchased will not change this fact. The relatively low number of aircraft requires the Air Force to select an aircraft with a wide range of mission capabilities. A wider range of usage will provide ability to meet a variety of potential future security challenges and secure the Air Force credibility in the future.

#### **Counterargument: Who Knows about Tomorrow?**

The traditional enemy, Russia, is now an important trading partner and has become a growing market for Norwegian products. However, political conflict over resources in the Barents Sea, such as oil and fishery resources exists between the two countries.

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<sup>5</sup>Odin.no "The Joint Strike Fighter recommended to replace the F-16", November 11, 2008

<http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/fd/Press-centre/Press-releases/2008/the-joint-strike-fighter-recommended-to-.html?id=536985>

Such topics are for the most treated at the negotiating tables, but Russian military budgets have been increasing in recent years. The activity from the Russian Air Force is now at the highest since the end of the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> As Russia shows her newfound military muscle to prove importance at the international arena, the Norwegian Air Force is busy preventing violations of Norwegian airspace. Frequent Russian bomber runs along the Norwegian border keeps the Norwegian Air Force occupied, but also maintains the Air Force as an important tool to Norwegian politicians. Even though being a small country, a trustworthy will to defend Norwegian territory and resources is important if Norway wants to be taken serious in future negotiations. If this development keeps up, the northern areas might regain the importance they had during the Cold War, and they are likely to regain the focus of Norwegian security politics. Therefore, it is dangerous to be too focused upon today's situation when deciding for tomorrow.

## **Training; Norwegian Counterparts and Collaborate Partners**

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<sup>6</sup> Minister of Defence Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen "Security in 21st Century Arctic", Conference:Tromsø, 25 September 2007

<http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/fd/The-Ministry/defence-minister-anne-grete-strom-erichs/Speeches-and-articles/2007/Arctic-challenges---the-fine-art-of-deal.html?id=481659>

Since the Second World War, the Norwegian Air Force has had a strong connection to the United States Air Force (USAF). Norway is currently sending all her new fighter pilots through USAF programs for training, as are the close partners Holland and Denmark. This system has ensured close ties between the nations and enabled a common understanding across these NATO countries.

With continued cooperation, Norway will ensure that Norwegian pilots will learn from combat experience gained by allies and receive better basic training. From the nineties until the present, Norwegian usage of combat airpower is mostly conducted in American led operations. Therefore, the importance of leveraging compatibility between Norwegian and American air assets cannot be overstated.

If choosing another aircraft than the one close allies are going to use in the future, Norway will have to start re-establishing training packages and facilities. Not only will this make implementing new aircraft more costly, but also if our training partners turn to be countries with no combat experience, it likely leads to less realistic training for the pilots. Ultimately, we run the risk of creating a less capable Air Force at a greater expense.

**Counterargument: Multinational training**



Upon completion of basic training, a pilot still has a long way to go before finishing all precombat readiness training. The implications of national tactics and more advanced skills will be part of such training, where pilots will learn from more experienced pilots. During combined exercises and deployments, the necessary understanding and cooperation would then most likely be incorporated. So from that point of view, the origin of basic training might not be that important. However, the argument fails to account for the cost savings and the benefit of learning from pilot instructors with actual combat experience.

### **International cooperation: Cornerstone of Norwegian security politics**

Since World War II, the Norwegian defense concept has been based upon reinforcements from NATO. The United States Marine Corps' (USMC) 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) still has readiness storages in Norway as part of these defense plans. Since the end of the Cold War however, Norway's importance as the northern flank to Russia has been deemphasized. As NATO lately has been fighting in the Balkans and in Afghanistan, its geographical focus has shifted to the new areas of tension. It seems that the Norwegian focus have shifted too. Norway is now more focused on supporting allied operations outside the country, to secure the standing as a

reliable ally within the NATO, than actually focusing upon our national defense.

JAS Grippen is an aircraft only sold to South Africa, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Even though Hungary and the Czech Republic are NATO members, they have no strong ties with Norway. Sweden has a history of being neutral and has no plans to join NATO. So by signaling a change of security partners, Norway might lose her gained long-term interest from traditional allies. In a time where Norway needs a functional alliance due to a downsized military structure, distancing from NATO will be unbeneficial for the long term security cooperation.

Also, countries that are both politically and geographically close to Norway are showing interest in the JSF, such as Denmark, Holland, and Finland. For Norway's national security it is important to maintain interoperability with these nations. If they choose to purchase the JSF, the importance of having the JSF in the Norwegian Air Force would be amplified, as cooperation and interoperability between the countries will be eased. JAS Grippen on its side does not satisfy such demands to international cooperation. Among other things, it does not work with common NATO Anti-Air Defense Systems.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Odin.no, "Press Release, JSF recommended to replace F 16", November 20, 2008

<http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/smk/Press-Center/Press-releases/2008/gar-inn-for-joint-strike-fighter-2.html?id=537022>

## **Counterargument; JAS Grippen will revitalize the Nordic Security Cooperation**

As there is no common shared defense organizations in Scandinavia, the Scandinavian countries started the Nordic Security Cooperation to tie the countries together with security cooperation. The countries have similar borders and share many of the same regional challenges.<sup>8</sup>

Norway has recently provided a logistical readiness force of 150 soldiers under Swedish command in support of the European Union forces. Furthermore, during the recent Nordic Security Cooperation's Defense Ministers meeting in Sweden, a new agreement was signed to strengthen the military cooperation.

Even though the Swedish aircraft was deemed as the more expensive one, one could see benefits in integrated service and support in the future. A mirroring of the Norwegian and Swedish Air Forces in the future would benefit both countries

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<sup>8</sup> Thorvald Stoltenberg, "NORDIC COOPERATION ON FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY",  
Proposals to the Nordic Foreign Ministers, Oslo February 9, 2009  
<http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/UD/Vedlegg/nordicreport.pdf>

operationally, logistically, and economically. In this way each country would run parts of the support services, and a closer cooperation would be beneficial for both countries. Obviously, this would necessitate both Norway and Sweden using the same aircraft, most likely the Grippen. This option would lead the Norwegian Air Force into a more isolated situation, moving away from other and closer allies.

### **Summary**

The Norwegian Armed Forces are one of the most important parts of Norwegian security politics, as a tool for Norwegian politicians when it comes to take care of Norwegian interest. *"NATO is the cornerstone of Norwegian security politics, and it is important that Norway positions herself within the alliance, and maintain a good relationship to the USA."*<sup>9</sup> The Vice Secretary of Defense, Espen Barth Eide modifies this image in his chronicle from this year: *"It is no longer so that the choice of combat aircrafts is a choice of security or political orientation. The security and political orientations are laid out by the Government and the Parliament using*

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<sup>9</sup> Final Report, P7600 New Air Capacities, (Translated by author).

*different tools than a single material investment, even though combat aircraft is a particularly important one."*<sup>10</sup>

Although some valid arguments in favor of the Grippen and the Eurofighter can be made, the final report states that these aircraft fall short of the operational capabilities offered by the JSF.

The same report further claims that both aircraft will satisfy the security and political considerations, but the actual orientation could be different as discussed in this paper. In times of change, opting for the safer, rather than seeking a new political orientation might be better.

The bottom-line for such a decision however, needs to revolve around the capabilities to be provided for the Norwegian Air Force. In every vital category, the JSF outperforms both the Grippen and the Eurofighter. Clearly being the airframe that Norway needs, political infighting must not prevent Norway from equipping the Air Force to fight and win in the future.

Word count 1973.

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<sup>10</sup> Espen Barth Eide, Chronicle, VG.no, October 8, 2008

[http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/fd/dep/politisk\\_ledelse/Statssekretar\\_Espen\\_Barth\\_Eide/taler\\_artikler/2008/kampfly-og-sikkerhetspolitikk.html?id=522607](http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/fd/dep/politisk_ledelse/Statssekretar_Espen_Barth_Eide/taler_artikler/2008/kampfly-og-sikkerhetspolitikk.html?id=522607)

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